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ABSTRACT

Three stages of teaching second language vocabulary are examined using examples of typical situations for Poles learning English. A basic assumption is that the vocabulary of any two languages, especially Indo-European languages, exhibits both ethnological and accidental similarity. The first stage is to make the phonic, or graphic, or both forms, of the second language word stay in the learner's minds. In the second stage, the learners should practice in the receptive use of the new words, and in stage three, the teacher should give the learners practice in using the words. To make the second language word stay in the learner's mind, the teacher should show all the similarities between the native and second language word, as well as suggest associations and mnemonic devices. The importance of proper translation equivalence in vocabulary teaching is emphasized, along with the need to provide learners with more than one native language equivalent of a second language word. The teacher should also provide the learner with examples of different contexts in which the newly learned word can be used and examples of incorrect use. The examples include common translation equivalents for Polish and English words and examples of words that can be associated with other words in the same semantic way. (SW)

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The Teacher's Mediation in Students' Vocabulary Learning

In communication-oriented teaching the most pressing concern for the learner is the necessity to master an adequate FL vocabulary; the learning of syntax, or pronunciation is, on the whole, comparatively less important in developing the ability of successful interaction in the target language. In situations where learners are well motivated, where their exposure to the target language is adequate, and where they experience both the need and the opportunity to communicate in the target language, the learning of vocabulary will be more or less automatic. Unfortunately, such situations form an exception rather than a rule, and one of the hard realities of a FL class is the problem the teacher faces in trying to help his students learn new vocabulary items.

Although the learning of FL vocabulary is usually classified as a kind of meaningful learning, it is, as Ausubel says,(Marton 1978:105-106)[1] very much like rote learning. The arbitrariness with which words are chosen to represent particular concepts and the necessity (for the learner) to reproduce them absolutely faithfully in order not to change their meaning contribute to the mechanical nature of the learning process and to the enormity of the task facing the FL student. Faced with a difficult learning task, the learners are known to use various kinds of simplification strategies. In the case of vocabulary learning simplification is equivalent to the introduction of meaningful elements into, essentially, a rote learning task. Not all learners are equally successful in this kind of simplification. We should like to claim, therefore, that teachers can do quite a lot to alleviate the burden of vocabulary learning facing their students by suggesting effort-saving short cuts. Unless teachers can convince their learners that success in the area of vocabulary learning is possible with less effort than could be expected, the enormity of the learning task will be very countermotivating.

All teachers and learners know that some FL words are easier to learn than others: one might suggest that there exists a continuum of ease (or difficulty), with international words and cognates at one (the easy) end

[1] The original reference quoted by Marton is as follows: Ausubel, D.P. 1968. Educational Psychology: A Cognitive View. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.

and words which do not evoke any associations in the learners' minds at the other (the difficult end). The characteristic features of such a continuum are, of course, specific to the particular pair of languages in contact: the native language of the student and the foreign language being learnt. The role of the teacher in facilitating the learner's learning task, as we see it, is to shift as many words as possible from the difficult end of the continuum towards the easier one. The assumption that we are making in this paper, and which we shall try to support with examples taken from situations typical for Poles learning English, is that the vocabulary of any two languages, certainly the ones belonging to the Indo-European family, exhibits a fair degree of similarity, both etymologically justified and accidental, which usually is not utilized by the learners because they fail to see it unless it is pointed out to them.

Learning a foreign language word, like, for example, getting to know people, is a process involving several stages: from mere nodding acquaintance through gradually increasing intimacy to full and complete understanding, and, perhaps, mastery and surrender. In this connection, J. F. O'Rourke (1974:73) quotes Edgar Dale, who suggested that learning a FL word might take place in the following 4 stages: "(1) I've never seen the word, (2) I've heard of it, but I don't know what it means, (3) I recognize it in context, it has something to do with... , and (4) I know the word in one or several of its meanings."

Chopping up something which is a continuous process into a number of individual bits (steps) is an idealization, which may, nevertheless, be useful for practical purposes. We should like to suggest, however, that Dale's first stage is superfluous since learning a FL word begins only when we recognize it as one we had met before. We should also like to imply that the process of learning a word does not end with the learning of "one or several of its meanings" but continues until we learn how to use it correctly in achieving communicative goals. The problem of defining of what it is that we know when we say that we have learnt a word is a complex one (Richards 1976) because we do not learn all words equally thoroughly.[2] Bearing this in mind we should like to argue that the

[2] We should like to note that the thoroughness with which we learn the concepts denoted by vocabulary items is different for different words. The majority of learners will consider that they know enough of a word

teacher, in trying to stimulate learning, should organize his vocabulary teaching in three main stages.

During the first stage the teacher, in presenting a new word to the learner, should try to make the learner remember its phonic form (sometimes also its graphic form) and its meaning (or one of its meanings). It is a very well-known fact to both teachers and learners that remembering these elements sometimes requires a lot of effort. Even after all the three of them are learnt during one lesson, the learners may forget some, or all of them, soon afterwards. It seems, therefore, that the teacher's aim in teaching a FL word is initially to present it in such a way that it makes the greatest possible impression upon the learner's mind.

During the second stage of teaching the teacher should use exercises whose aim would be to develop further the knowledge of the newly-learnt word. We assume that the most profitable exercises at this stage would be the ones stressing reception rather than production in the foreign language. During the first stage of learning the student would learn, among other things, the native language counterpart for each FL word. This is usually equivalent to learning a new name for an already familiar concept (Marton 1978:101-129). During the second stage the teacher should provide the learner with examples of different kinds of contexts in which the newly-learnt word can be used so that the learner can realize and learn the differences in the range of meaning between the native and the foreign language words. To achieve this goal the teacher must provide negative examples, i.e. examples of incorrect use. If negative examples are not provided and/or if they are not described as incorrect the learners will be delayed in the learning of the meaning of the word. They may assume that the range of meaning of the FL word is identical with that of the NL word, which will inevitably lead to error. Dictionaries, on the whole, provide little help in this area. This fact is stressed, for example, in a recent article by Tritch (1981), who also says that negative feedback is essential in forming and testing hypotheses about a foreign language. At this stage the learners also have to be made aware of other meanings of the word they are trying to master.

Exposing the learner to the foreign language by providing a variety of contexts may also be amplified, in dealing with adult learners, by

like "robin" if they know it is a noun denoting a bird, even if they cannot tell the bird from a sparrow. A zoologist, on the other hand, could not function as one if he did not know the bird's colour, size, etc.

native language explanations and clarifications of the differences in the ranges of meaning between the counterpart NL and FL words.

During the third stage of teaching the meaning of a new word the teacher should concentrate on the teaching of how to use it productively. This stage should consist of some imitation exercises as well as exercises developing the ability to use the word correctly in sentences. The most difficult problem that faces both the teacher and the learner at this stage is the question of word collocations. As Marton (1978:101-129) says, these usually present no difficulties in reception but are extremely hard to acquire productively. One of the remedies that he suggests might be to single them out in translation and retranslation exercises. Another interesting suggestion recently made in the article by Tritch (1981) is that the teacher should provide the learner with all the necessary information about a FL word by using for it a frame based on Fillmore's theory of cases together with a list of acceptable and unacceptable collocations.

After this brief description of the three stages of teaching a FL vocabulary we should like to return to a more detailed discussion of the first stage. Before we do that, however, we should like to stress that it was not our intention to provide a rigid framework of teaching procedures which should always be rigidly applied. It is obvious, for example, that in teaching some vocabulary items the teaching will stop after the first two stages, and, sometimes, even after the very first one. This concerns the words which are meant to be known only receptively. As an example, let us take a word like "serendipity". In teaching it we only have to make sure that the learner remembers that it denotes "the faculty of making fortunate or unexpected discoveries by chance" every time he meets it in speech or in writing. The fact that the process of learning this word may go on after the teacher has stopped teaching it is something which the proposed stages of teaching do not recognize. However, we are concentrating on what the teacher should do to help the learners in their learning, and we think that he should first try to make the phonic, or graphic, or both forms of the FL word and one of its meanings "stick" in the learners' minds (stage one); he should then give the learners practice in the receptive use of all the words introduced so far (stage two); and finally, the teacher should give the learners practice in the using of some of the words introduced in the previous two stages (stage three).

The best way in which the teacher can make a FL word "stick" in the learners' minds is by bringing out all the similarities which may exist between it and its NL counterpart and by suggesting associations and mnemonic devices. At this point one is compelled to say a few words in defence of cognates - words, in different languages, which come from the same source. It has often been stressed that their surface similarity may lead the unsuspecting learner into error because they very often differ in meaning. It is significant that the name which has been used to denote such words is "false friends".[3]

It is true that the meanings of such words often differ in respective languages but so do the ranges of meaning of any word in a foreign language and its translation equivalent in the NL. An English word like "sympathetic" will almost always make Polish learners assume that its Polish equivalent is "sympatyczny" (in fact "sympatyczny" means "nice"). A word like "dinner" is usually rendered in Polish as "obiad" but the learners soon notice that sometimes it is taken at a time which makes it Polish "kolacja" (supper); at other times a meal which a Pole would call "dinner" is described by the English as "lunch". In case of both words the teacher has to do something in order that the learners might learn the correct range of meaning of each of them. In the former case his task is easier since the learners will have no difficulty with remembering both the phonic and the graphic shape of the word; the correct meaning may be taught via the word "sympathy" (e.g. "My sympathies are with the miners" - "Moja sympatia jest po stronie górników"). In the latter case the phonic and the graphic form of the word will have to be remembered by the learners along with its meaning.[4]

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[3] I was immensly gratified, after having read the present paper at an IATEFL Congress in London, to learn that David Cross from the Archbishop Ramsey School in London did some extremely successful teaching at his compact courses, utilizing cognates. The reference at the end (Cross 1978) concerns English-speaking pupils learning French.

[4] This is, perhaps, an extreme example because it involves a thorough modification of the concept of a system of meals in English and Polish but it clearly illustrates the point we are trying to make. Some sort of modification of a NL concept to fit a FL equivalent will have to be made in the learning of practically all FL words.

The proposal made here and concerning the teaching of vocabulary is similar to the proposals concerning the teaching of structure. For example, James(1980:160-161) suggests that in teaching an L2 form, where there is a choice of two (or more) alternative constructions, the teacher should teach the construction which is isomorphic with an equivalent L1 form first. He argues that an L2 form which is inherently complex may be easier to learn if it parallels an isomorphic L1 form than an inherently simple L2 form having no counterpart in L1. One of the examples he gives concerns polarity questions in German. German has two such forms:

a) Kennen Sie ihn?
b) Ob Sie ihn kennen?

Since form (b) is isomorphic with the Polish form using an initial question particle "czy" ("Czy pan go zna?"), James adds that ..."the obvious implication is to teach the Pole question form (b) first" (James 1980:161), even though forms (a) and (b) are stylistically different.

Apart from cognates and international words, like "television", "telephone", "O.K.", etc., there is a group of English words which can be made easy to learn by pointing out similarities between them and their Polish equivalents. Sometimes the similarity is in spelling, but most often in pronunciation. There are also different degrees of similarity: from whole English words contained within their Polish equivalents to only a few identical sounds (or letters).

In the examples that follow we shall try to group words according to a feature they seem to share but we do not pretend that this is any systematic classification.

1. The graphic form of the English word forms a part of a Polish word.

a) FUtRo [5] -fur
b) BARykadować- to bar
c) PINezka - a tack, a drawing pin

1(a) is probably a representative of a very small group of words of this kind. 1(b) represents words which should seem easy to learn without the teacher's intervention. The reason for including it here is that the author is convinced that this may not always be the case, and he himself

[5] This rather unusual spelling is a mnemonic device, not the spelling used in Polish.

was taught the word "barricade" (Polish - "barykada","barykadować") and the word "to bar" independently of each other, and only later noticed that they were related. A lot depends on the teacher's use of a proper translation equivalent, as will be illustrated in (2).

2. The phonic form of the English word forms a part of the Polish word.

muszla	-shell-	muSZELka (diminutive)
trasa	-route-	marszRUTa
surowy	- raw -	suROwy

These examples show how the use of a particular translation equivalent may make an English word easy to learn. The Polish words in the first column are the most common translation equivalents; the words in the third column are less frequent. Notice the mnemonic device in "suROwy", where the similarity is quite accidental.

3. Further examples of FL words which may be easy to learn if proper translation equivalents are used.

lie	-kłamać	łgać
beg	-prosić	żebrać
feather	-pióro	pierze
skip	-SKakać	SKIkać(dialect)
trouble	-kłopotać	TURBOwać (dialect)
rob	-RaBować	obROBić (slang).

The Polish words in the central column are the commonly used translation equivalents. We suggest, however, that the teacher first should use the translation equivalents from the column on the right. It may be an impressionistic assertion but we feel that they are more similar to the English words and that using them will help the learners remember the words more easily (the teacher might use these <u>in addition</u> to the commonly used translation equivalents). Later on the teacher may supply still other equivalents and teach the students the full range of meaning of each of such words.

Words like the diminutive "muszelka" in (2), dialect and slang forms in (3) and archaic forms like "kasztel" in (4) (below) present problems with register, style, etc. (cf. James 1980) but we are convinced that they may nevertheless simplify the learning task for the learners if the teacher continues the process of teaching vocabulary beyond stage one, as suggested here.

The teacher should also use mediators for words whose translation equivalents bear no obvious resemblance to their FL counterparts by associating them with other words in the same semantic field.

4. Words which can be associated with other words in the same semantic field.

   war - wojna,

   but WARowny - fortified (i.e. ready for war)

   castle - zamek,

   but KASzTEL (a fortified stronghold in Old Poland).

In conclusion let us repeat the most important points which seem appropriate:

1. Words of the sort discussed here may be used to form hosts of other words through a process of derivation - a technique which was not mentioned in the paper but which was taken for granted.
2. Some words are less useful than others. These can be taught for receptive purposes only.
3. It is necessary to stress the importance of proper translation equivalents in vocabulary teaching. It must especially be stressed that teachers should not give the learners only one NL equivalent of a FL word.
4. Instead of supplying ready-made associations and mediators the teacher may do well to make learners search for associations and mediators of their own. These individual associations, as psychology tells us, are retained longer and the words may be learned more easily.
5. The fact that the paper is mainly concerned with the use of NL equivalents for FL words does not mean that we advocate the abandoning of other techniques of teaching vocabulary (for example, ostensive techniques, context, etc.).

Concluding these remarks we should like to express our conviction that some of the observations made here may be applicable to other languages as well (cf. Cross 1978).

Note: This is a revised version of a paper presented at an IATEFL Conference in London, in December 1981.

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